

CHAPTER 4

BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Reflection

While problems and conflicts are unavoidable elements of life, good communication skills facilitate problem-solving and resolution of conflicts. Ineffective communication creates a void that breeds misunderstanding and distrust.

Peggy Dettmer, Linda Thurston and Norma Dyck (2002, p. 125)

INTENDED LEARNER OUTCOMES

When you have worked through this chapter you should be able to:

- describe communication and human relationships as dynamic and related processes
- define the concept of interference
- modify your communicative behaviour to promote positive relationships
- develop active listening skills
- use I-messages to assert your position
- apply a negotiation process
- briefly explain the key concepts highlighted in this chapter.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

- Starter: Karen makes the connection...
- Introduction
- The communication process
- Communication with interference
- Non-verbal communication
- Interpreting non-verbal signals
- Active listening
- Open questioning
- Asserting
- Negotiating
- Identify the problem
- Identify possible options
- Identify the outcomes of each choice
- Delete unacceptable options
- Apply the agreed solution
- Identify a time for review
- Start a rumour
- More practice

Arthur-Kelly et al (2006)
Classroom Management:
Creating Positive
Learning Environments

STARTER: KAREN MAKES THE CONNECTION...

'It's funny,' thought Karen, 'but it is only ever during school holidays that I have the space and time to ponder my working life. What is it, then, about my current Year 4 class that makes me so apprehensive? It is something about the way we connect,' Karen thought, but she couldn't quite nail the feeling. 'Actually, more to the point, we don't connect: I just give instructions and manage disobedience when it happens.'

And then one day, walking on the beach, it hit her: 'All this time I have focused on compliance. Maybe I need to relate to the students and communicate at their level... That will mean listening to what they tell me.' With another week of holidays still to run, Karen found herself keen to get back to school to try this new approach to understanding her students. 'What will it mean for the tone of my classroom?' she wondered.

Introduction

Appropriate communication is a fundamental component in classrooms where an ecosystem is established to build healthy relationships and promote positive behaviour. As the chapter title suggests, effective communication is a platform for the development of human relationships that are functional and reciprocal. The manner in which messages are relayed to and from class members contributes to a large degree to the ecosystem of the classroom. Classrooms can be supportive or oppressive, caring or critical, exciting or dull, depending on how communication is handled.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the communication process in order to identify potential problems and recognise proactive measures teachers can take to ensure that the messages they send are relatively free from contamination. Communicative processes of listening, asserting and negotiating are discussed from a skills perspective, with the idea of adding to teachers' repertoires skills that may help build a communication and relationship climate conducive to positive behaviour. Of course, the same principles for communication and relationship building are relevant at a school level as well (see Sleishman, 2005).

One of the problems with communication stems directly from the fact that we all do so much of it. Because communication is a constant activity in our everyday lives, we end up doing much of our communicating on automatic pilot. People are capable of engaging in enormously complex behaviour without conscious awareness of its subcomponents. Experienced drivers, for example, are rarely aware of the small behaviours they complete in a complex sequence to ultimately arrive at their destination. Anyone who has ever driven a car intending to go to one place, but who has ended up at another destination because of not paying attention to where he or she was going, has experienced complex behaviour on automatic pilot. Simply because an intended route sometimes encompasses a more familiar one, a driver can end up following the more familiar route without realising it.

Communication operates on much the same principle. We often become so focused on the transmission of certain information that we pay little attention to the manner in which we

communicate. Thus we sometimes end up sending unclear messages, or messages contaminated with other information, by virtue of the *way* we choose to communicate, rather than *what* we choose to communicate.

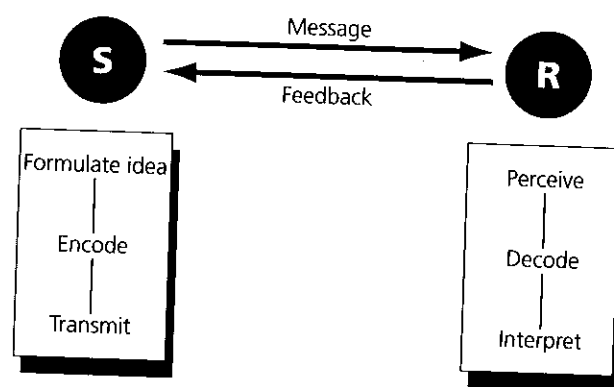
The communication process

Interpersonal communication (direct communication between people) is a two-way process. It almost always involves sending and receiving messages, and in most instances these components occur simultaneously. Message recipients are not passive: they continuously provide *feedback* to the sender of the message. In other words, they communicate their level of receptiveness through their openness to receive the message, their attentiveness, their comprehension and their evaluation of the message. They also communicate their attitudes towards the message content and the sender of the message, along with many other pieces of information.

The sender of the message in turn makes adjustments to the message content and manner of delivery in response to the feedback received. In this way, interpersonal communication is seen as a continuous interaction of the simultaneous receipt and delivery of messages (Hansford, 1988). In its simplified form, this process may be represented as it is in Figure 4.1. Similar communication processes were described by Cole and Chan (1994) in relation to teaching principles and practices, and are also depicted in the process models described by Lewis and Slade (1994) and Kaye (1994).

In Figure 4.1, the message sender (S) intends to inform the receiver (R) of the content of the sender's idea. The idea that finally reaches the receiver will ideally be as close as possible to the original idea that occurred to the sender. However, due to the many transmutations necessary in the communication process, the original and the final ideas seldom equate, as highlighted in Activity 4.1 at the end of this chapter.

FIGURE 4.1 SIMPLE COMMUNICATION



Source: Adapted from Hansford (1988).

Formulating the idea

Most ideas begin as abstract thought (Cole & Chan, 1994). They are generally holistic and, before they are encoded into language, need to be formulated into a logical sequence of related components to enable the final product to be rebuilt by the message receiver (Cooper & Simonds, 1999). The number and sequence of steps often depend on the individual's prior knowledge and familiarity with the concepts involved.

From the sender's point of view, this process involves a prediction of the receiver's expertise. Many communications, for example, have been flawed by pitching the concepts too high (too complex, or too few steps) resulting in the receiver's confusion, or they have been pitched too low (too simple, too few steps) resulting in the receiver feeling bored or insulted.

Encoding

The thought process thus formulated then needs to be encoded into a medium (Hansford, 1988). The choice of medium will depend on the purpose and content of the message, the setting, the relative proximity, familiarity, status, gender, age and many other characteristics of the people involved. If oral language is chosen as the medium, sentence structure and words need to be chosen that best fit the characteristics of the idea, the language experience of the sender, and the sender's prediction of the language experience and expectations of the receiver. The relative 'goodness of fit' of each of these considerations will create differences to some degree between the idea originally conceived and the message delivered (Lewis & Slade, 1994).

Transmitting

The sender, having encoded the message into a medium, then needs to transmit the message. Again, if oral language is chosen, the sender needs to gauge relative volume, pace, pitch modulation, emphasis, inflection, pause and articulation to accurately depict the idea. These *paralinguistic* considerations also involve predictions about the receiver's language experience. Paralinguistics has the capacity to considerably alter the meaning of messages sent (Kaye, 1994).

Perceiving

The receiver's part in the communication process begins with his or her perception of the message transmission (Lewis & Slade, 1994). Obviously the receiver's senses are involved, and since we are using the example of oral language, acuity of hearing is central. Even with oral language, other senses may be involved – principally sight and possibly touch and smell (the involvement of other senses will be explained in a later section dealing with non-verbal communication).

Other cognitive systems are also involved in message perception (Cole & Chan, 1994), especially the attention system and working memory. The receiver needs to attend to the message signal and needs to have a sufficient memory storage capacity to hold meaningful chunks of the message to enable decoding.

Decoding

This is the stage of initial message comprehension. The reverse of the encoding process, at this stage the language medium is translated into its meaning (Hansford, 1988). There is not, however, a one-to-one correspondence between one person's encoding and another's decoding.

Words and sometimes phrases have denotative and connotative meanings. *Denotative* meanings refer to the dictionary definitions of words, and *connotative* meanings refer to the differing meanings and associations that words develop through common or colloquial usage (Taylor, Meyer, Rosengrant & Samples, 1989). Connotative meanings are highly dependent on an individual's experience and cultural background. If the message transmitted contained metaphor, irony, humour, sarcasm or colloquial terms, then it is more likely the connotative meaning that was intended.

Interpreting

Interpretation of a message involves comprehension at a deeper level, as well as evaluation and judgement (Cole & Chan, 1994). This process usually requires a level of inference on the receiver's behalf.

Few messages contain information about all aspects of the original idea. Usually this would take too long, so much is assumed to be understood. Messages, then, are usually summaries of the main features of original ideas, and it is up to the receiver to infer the remainder of the information. Receivers construct this meaning according to their own experience, which may or may not match the sender's. Message content as understood by the receiver is then evaluated according to the receiver's experience and attitudes. Receivers then communicate their understanding and judgement of the message through feedback.

Feedback

Given the number of processes involved in sending and receiving messages, even in this simplified form, it is not hard to see how misunderstandings can occur. Accurate communication, in fact, may seem to be unusual.

Providing a gauge for the accuracy of message transmission is the function of *feedback* (Kaye, 1994). During message transmission, the sender attends to the receiver's feedback in order to judge the receiver's attentiveness, comprehension of each component of the message, judgement of the ideas, and desire to respond. The sender may then adjust the message content and structure or the manner of delivery in response to such feedback. Thus the message sender is also a receiver of simultaneous messages; while the receiver is also a sender (Lewis & Slade, 1994). This two-way process is essential, at least in part, to reduce the potential for misunderstanding. Anyone who has attempted to explain an idea on the telephone to another individual who fails to respond in any audible way will have experienced the difficulty of communication without feedback.

Communication with interference

Communication is more complicated than just described, however, because of the existence of interference. *Interference* is any condition outside the message that reduces the purity of the message and thus its potential to convey the meaning intended (Kaye, 1994).

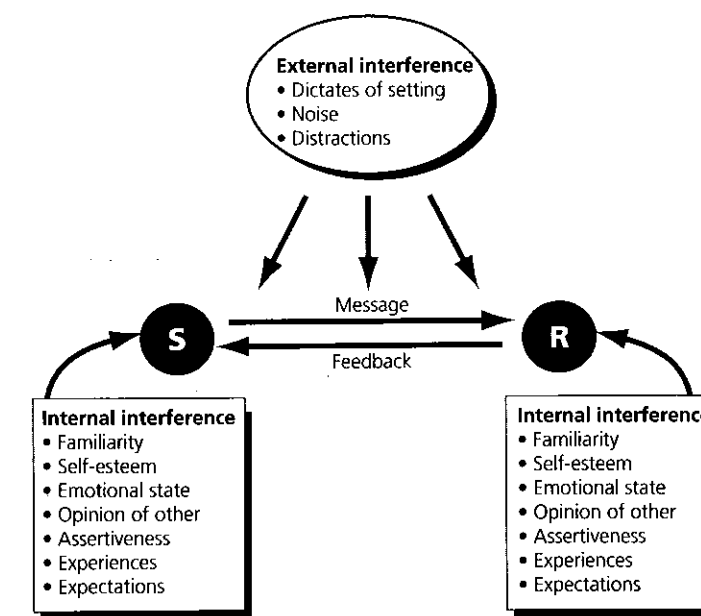
Interference can include environmental factors such as excessive noise, or internal factors such as emotional reactions that impair judgement. The following adjustments to the simple communication diagram (see Figure 4.2) illustrate some interference characteristics.

External interference

The most obvious forms of external interference are noise and proximity. Trying to speak to individuals or groups of students while the class is noisy obviously makes communicating more difficult. Speaking to children who are some distance away – for example, at the rear of the classroom – interferes with message transmission (Hansford, 1988). Distracting activities taking place nearby impinge upon the receiver's ability to attend to the message.

Certain messages are affected by the setting in which they occur. These are detailed later in the chapter (see Non-verbal communication), because settings are themselves often communicative (Lewis & Slade, 1994). Some messages are more appropriate in one setting than another, and the extent to which they are listened to without contamination usually depends on their relative appropriateness. For example, messages delivered to a child in front of other

FIGURE 4.2 COMMUNICATION WITH INTERFERENCE



Source: Adapted from Hansford (1988).

children differ from those delivered in private, while messages delivered in a classroom at the teacher's desk often differ from those delivered in the playground (Cooper & Simonds, 1999). Thus timing and setting considerations are important in removing interference effects.

Internal interference

Internal interference is a much more subtle phenomenon. These are functions of an individual's emotional state, self-perception, relative status, past experience, urgency, level of interest or any other factors that affect attention given to the message or the propensity to contaminate the purity of the message (Cole & Chan, 1994; Kaye, 1994). Internal interference can affect the sender as well as the receiver of messages.

In Box 4.1, Mr Lester is sending mixed messages. He may defend his position by saying he intended to praise Nina and emphasise the main points of a behavioural lesson. However, he communicated disrespect, emphasised his position of power, devalued Nina's current efforts, implied a threat and devalued her personally when he dismissed her. Nina's response indicates that she interpreted the message as an insult rather than any form of praise. The message was contaminated by Mr Lester's internal interference – his judgement of past behaviour and his need to assert his authority.

Many people send mixed messages consisting of a *surface message* and an *implied message* (Adler et al., 1995). This is a form of communication trickery. The aim is to claim the surface message was harmless, when really an attempt was made to assert power or devalue the other person. Sarcasm and irony are common forms of mixed messages that result in message contamination. Sometimes the interference is unintended and due to the oversensitivity of the receiver or the insensitivity of the message sender.

Minimising interference

Since interference reduces the likelihood of intended messages equating with received messages, it should be minimised. Reducing interference reduces misunderstanding (Dettmer et al., 2002).

BOX 4.1

Mr Lester, the teacher, is speaking to Nina at his desk.

Mr L.: Nina, that's good. You've finished all the set work in record time. You're a very clever girl. You see how easy it can be when you put in the effort? I hope you've learned the value of concentrating on your work, instead of chatting to Megan. If you keep this up, I'll be happy to report to your parents that you've started to take your work seriously. Now see if you can find something to busy yourself with while the others catch up.

(Nina returns to her seat, slams her book on the desk, starts drawing an unflattering caricature of Mr L., shows it to Megan and laughs. When challenged by Mr L., Nina replies):

Nina: You said I should busy myself, so I am. I'm very busy.

Many interference effects are communicated non-verbally – in posture, tone of voice and the like. These aspects of interpersonal communication are less likely to be as carefully considered as the words chosen to express a message, but they need to be considered if interference is to be reduced (see Activity 4.2 at the end of this chapter). We examine non-verbal communication in more detail further on.

In the following sections methods of listening, message formulation and negotiation are considered to provide other ways of reducing interference effects and thereby improving the clarity and effectiveness of communication. Since the focus of this book is on classroom management, the coverage of communication skills will be restricted to that end. Perusal of texts listed as further reading, however, will provide an insight into the use of communication skills across a much broader domain.

Non-verbal communication

Communication is multi-channelled. Much of the meaning constructed by the receiver of a message is guided by factors other than the words spoken. In fact, many researchers have concluded that meaning conveyed by words is often less important than that conveyed non-verbally. It is often reported that between 55 and 70 per cent of interpersonal communication takes place non-verbally (Harrison & Crouch, 1975; Kaye, 1994; Nolan, 1975), although disagreement about this estimate is noted in the literature (Cooper & Simonds, 1999).

Mehrabian (1972) attempted to identify specific values of meaning transmission using one-word utterances, and concluded that only seven per cent of message meaning was attributable to words, while a further 38 per cent was attributable to paralinguistic features, and 55 per cent was attributable to non-verbal facial cues. Mehrabian's use of one-word utterances in his study may have inadvertently increased the effect of non-verbal cues, so his finding that 93 per cent of communication takes place through factors other than words may be somewhat exaggerated when applied to normal communication (Cooper & Simonds, 1999). Nevertheless, his study serves to highlight the very powerful influence of non-verbal communication on any message and the necessity of taking this aspect into account when constructing messages.

Non-verbal communication refers to any meaningful aspect of a message other than the words spoken. It can include aspects of facial expression, eye contact, paralinguistics, body positioning, gesture, proximity, touching, clothing, personal physical characteristics and even the physical setting in which the communication takes place. According to Cooper and Simonds (1999), the pervasive nature of non-verbal communication makes it almost impossible for us to avoid communicating something whenever someone else perceives us. Activity 4.4 serves to highlight some of these communicative aspects of non-verbal behaviour. A brief summary of the effects of these factors is provided here, and interested readers are referred to Neill (1991) (listed in Further reading at the end of this chapter) for an in-depth analysis of the process of non-verbal communication in classrooms.

Facial expression

Facial expressions are among the best-known and most easily recognised non-verbal behaviours (Kaye, 1994) that principally communicate emotional state and the receiver's level of interest (Cook, 1973; Ekman, Friesen & Ellsworth, 1972). Facial expressions mainly rely on the mouth, eyes and eyebrows to convey messages. Cooper and Simonds (1999) concluded that most teachers develop formal and controlling non-verbal environments in their classrooms, and emphasise the positive effects on mood and on levels of intimacy through the regular use of smiles.

Eye contact

Eye contact, directing one's gaze at another's eyes, is often used to communicate such things as interest, degree of intimacy, relative status and personal characteristics such as shyness and assertiveness. It has the additional meta-communication function of regulating the flow of conversations (Kaye, 1994). Meta-communication refers to communication about communication. Meta-communication signals are often by variations in eye contact and are needed in order to allow other speakers to take the floor during conversations.

Paralinguistics

Paralinguistics is the effect of how we deliver a message, and includes features such as volume and inflection, pitch, tone, articulation, pauses, and rate of speech (Adler et al., 1995). This aspect of non-verbal communication is often referred to as 'tone of voice'. Paralinguistic features can also be used to indicate questioning, sarcasm, irony and meta-communicative functions, as well as emotional states such as anxiety, anger, sadness and happiness.

Positioning and posture

How an individual is positioned relative to another in a communicative event, itself communicates information about relative status, intimacy and formality of a conversation (Putnis & Petelin, 1996). Posture may convey this information as well as indicating the level of interest, openness or assertion, and even emotional states such as anxiety, depression and anger (Lewis & Slade, 1994).

Consider the different messages conveyed by a teacher who stands rigidly in the front of a classroom with arms folded, another who sits casually on the desk with arms extended or to the side, and another who kneels next to a child's desk slightly to the side. The first may be asserting authority over the class because of a disruption, the second may be expecting students to open up in a class discussion, while the third may be indicating a willingness to help a child who is having difficulty.

Gesture

Gesture refers to body movements, usually with the head, arms, hands or shoulders. These movements often have specific meanings, such as when someone shakes or nods his or her head to

indicate the affirmative or the negative. Some gestures, especially hand gestures, are culturally dependent (Kaye, 1994).

Other gestures are used to indicate emotional states such as excitement, anger or hopelessness, or to serve meta-communicative functions (Lewis & Slade, 1994), for example, looking at one's watch and beginning to stand indicates that a conversation is terminating.

Proximity and touch

Proximity refers to the physical distance between people during communication. Most people are familiar with the notion of *personal space* – an invisible area of space around us, the invasion of which usually makes us feel uncomfortable. Most of us have also experienced the feeling of being backed up against a wall by people who invade our personal space.

The use of space and touching indicate relative levels of intimacy, respect and formality in conversations. Each individual tolerates varying distances depending on the closeness of the relationship to the other person involved.

Some forms of touch are ritualistic signals of greeting and parting, such as a handshake with a stranger or a kiss on the cheek of a family member. Such communicative touching is often subject to cultural variation. A touch on the shoulder or arm can indicate support, encouragement or affection. Touches on other parts of the body can be interpreted as intimate or offensive and can even result in litigation.

Proximity and touch are powerful signals of relationship closeness and caring (Kaye, 1994). As such they can be helpful to teachers in building a productive rapport, but they are also intrusive and can easily offend. Particular sensitivity on the part of the teacher is necessary when utilising this form of communication.

Personal physical characteristics

Some personal characteristics are fixed, such as age, gender, ethnic origin, height and body build. Others are variable, such as hairstyle, clothing, odours and stylised speech mannerisms. Still others fall somewhere in between, such as dialect or accent. These can be changed, but often require considerable training and concentration. All nevertheless have a communicative effect (Taylor et al., 1989). We typically assume much about a person's status, interests, attitudes and predispositions from physical characteristics, and interpret communication with that person accordingly.

Physical setting

Much is communicated by the *physical setting* in which we choose to hold conversations. Different conversations are encouraged by one setting rather than another. A conversation with someone over a cup of coffee, with both parties seated on comfortable lounge chairs that are angled slightly towards each other, creates an entirely different atmosphere from that created by a conversation in a formal office, with one person standing facing another who is seated behind a large desk, the

standing person first having had to make an appointment with a secretary. It is highly unlikely that the same conversation could occur in both settings.

In a similar way, the arrangement of classroom furniture (as discussed in Chapter 6) communicates much about the teacher's style and the manner in which lessons will be conducted even before the teacher has entered the room (Cooper & Simonds, 1999).

Non-verbal communication has a very significant communicative impact. It is so important, yet it is probably the aspect of communication about which we are least aware and about which we are taught least (Dettmer et al., 2002). Some aspects have been taught. For example, as children most of us heard a teacher or parent say, 'Don't use that tone of voice with me' or 'Look at me when I speak to you', but most non-verbal intricacies appear to be learnt incidentally.

How often do we think, 'Now, before I say this I must have an open posture, with an angled seating position, monitor my eye contact, relax my vocal chords, relax my shoulder muscles, maintain an even breathing pattern, and choose non-emotive words with non-judgmental inflection'? We often don't recognise our own non-verbal communication, which may be among the reasons why people pay so much attention to it. This is perhaps because:

- People think non-verbal communication is less likely to be consciously controlled and is therefore less likely to be deceptive.
- Much of what we say is ambiguous, so the meaning may be clarified by non-verbal means.
- We use irony, humour and sarcasm in speech, most of which is based on meaning something other than the spoken words.
- We often don't speak in well-formed sentences, non-verbals are used to help us form meaningful boundaries.
- Non-verbal characteristics are more effective in communicating emotions.
- We rely heavily on non-verbal methods to govern the flow of conversations.

Interpreting non-verbal signals

Despite their appeal, non-verbal messages are not always easy to interpret accurately (Kaye, 1994). Dictionaries cannot be used to check the meaning of non-verbal cues. Sometimes even relatively obvious signals such as a smile or a frown are deceiving.

Box 4.2 illustrates a problem with interpreting non-verbal messages: we *observe* the behaviour and *infer* a meaning (Taylor et al., 1989). Our inferences come from our own habitual behaviour or that of familiar others. When we see someone doing what we or others close to us would do, we assume he or she means the same as we would if we did the same thing. This may not be so.

The error factor obviously increases the more distant the person is from our experience in terms of our social class, geographic location or cultural background (Adler et al., 1995; Putnis & Petelin, 1996). Teachers who work in multicultural settings need to take this into account, or mutual misunderstandings are likely.

BOX 4.2

An important Australian politician was labelled as 'arrogant' during an election campaign because of his constant grin. He was seen to grin even when delivering bad news. Photographs of his smiling face were regularly printed in newspapers appended to stories about public servants being sacked and services being reduced. During a television interview he stated (while grinning) that he was very shy, that his smile was a nervous reaction, and that he felt nervous about publicly delivering bad news.

The politician's image as an arrogant person ultimately cost him his position in parliament. If what he said in the television interview was true, then the label of arrogance had resulted from a serious misunderstanding of a non-verbal signal on behalf of a large section of the Australian population.

Why did so many people refuse to believe this man, given his verbal interpretation of his non-verbal message? Where verbal and non-verbal information are contradictory, we often believe the evidence of the non-verbal information. In other words, we tend to believe what we see rather than what we hear. In this case it may have also been affected by the fact that he was a politician and people's expectation that politicians do not always tell the full truth.

In order to minimise misunderstandings, effective communicators need to:

- be aware of the inferences they make from non-verbal messages
- avoid jumping to the conclusion that their inferences are correct
- be aware of their own non-verbal behaviour and how it may be interpreted.

Active listening

That we potentially misunderstand much communication brings us naturally to the skill of listening and in particular, a technique known variously as active listening, reflective listening, empathic responding, active empathy or responsive listening. In this text, the listening process most effective in dealing with problem behaviour and negotiating solutions is referred to as *active listening*.

Listening is that part of communication we do most (Cooper & Simonds, 1999). In some occupations it has been shown that the majority of an individual's day can be spent listening to someone (Barker, 1987). Yet according to Taylor et al. (1989) our listening behaviour tends to be less than 50 per cent accurate. Listening is an aspect of communication in which people generally receive little training; they tend also to demonstrate little awareness of their listening behaviour when they are doing it.

Consider the variation in your own listening behaviour. If you were to ask your spouse or partner, the school principal, your lecturer, your peers, your best friend and the children at school how good a listener you are, how do you think they would respond? Usually there is a marked variation, with the best listening happening between good friends (this may or may not include a spouse) and the worst occurring with children. Teachers may in fact be in danger of developing

BOX 4.3

It is possible in a social gathering to hear the sounds of many conversations occurring around us simultaneously. The sounds are simply noise and although we might pick out an occasional word here and there, the meaning of the many conversations is generally lost. If, however, we focus our attention on just one nearby conversation, we can listen to the messages. The particular conversation comes to the foreground and the other conversations remain in the background. If we then switch our attention to another conversation, we can understand the new one, while the previous conversation blends into the background.

This kind of behaviour is called 'eavesdropping'. It may not be socially acceptable, but it nevertheless illustrates the active involvement of our attention system in the process of listening.

poor listening skills because of their authoritative and responsible positions in relation to children in their class (as reflected on by Karen at the beginning of this chapter). The dictates of the setting with large classes and a need to maintain order militate against teachers being able to take the time to listen well.

Why don't we listen well with some people? There is a marked difference between listening and hearing. *Hearing* involves sounds being received by the ear and translated into signals sent to the brain. *Listening* involves the use of the attention system to translate sounds and other signals into language in order to interpret meaning and evaluate the message (Adler et al., 1995). Hearing is passive, but listening is purposeful (see Box 4.3).

If we are required to respond to a message, such as answering a question, making a comment, or taking some action, we are more likely to listen actively – in other words, to focus our attention on the speaker and intentionally evaluate the message. Listening in this format is improved. During this process, however, we are required to interpret the meaning of the message through a number of channels (verbal and non-verbal); evaluate the content through reference to our own attitudes, values and experiences; and prepare a response. These other processes require attention that detracts from the process of listening.

On reflection

Have you ever wondered how it is possible during a discussion for people to reply to you straight away? They can do this because they prepare their response while you are talking (when they should be listening!). Some people even interrupt and reply before you've finished. What would you say about their listening behaviour?

If a message is long and uninteresting, attention may drift to other things. The listener may be distracted by objects or events in the near vicinity, or by competing thoughts, or may even begin to daydream. Many readers may have experienced this phenomenon when listening, as part of a passive audience, to a speech or lecture.

Our roles and attitudes often interfere with listening behaviour. As mentioned earlier, teachers in particular are often poor listeners when it comes to children (Dettmer et al., 2002). In this role

BOX 4.4

Imagine you are about to leave for work in the morning. You go out of your front door only to find your car has been stolen. You return to the house and say to your partner: 'Someone b—— stole my car!', to which your partner replies 'Well, I suggest you call the police instead of telling me, and catch a cab to work. I hope you've learnt a lesson from this: not to leave your car unlocked.'

How would you feel?

Adults often respond to the problems children experience in such a way. Children may feel an emotion similar to your own when spoken to without empathy.

people often feel an obligation to advise, solve problems and give information. Under these conditions they may spend little time listening and a great deal of time talking. Unfortunately, a child may not listen well to the wise advice of the teacher, because the problem may not have been clarified and the child may not have had the opportunity to unburden effectively.

Communicating with active listening

We have noted that there are many factors that interfere with sending and receiving messages. Strong emotion has a marked impact on the quality of communication. Emotion interferes with the rational interpretation of messages and also acts to contaminate verbal messages sent through competing non-verbal signals.

While a listener is in a strong emotional state, messages that provide advice on solutions to the problem are often not well received. Neither are messages that aim to point out salient lessons the listener should learn from the experience (see Box 4.4). However, this is very often the tone of messages that adults send to children when children experience problems.

Another significant interference effect is created when someone responds to another's message before the message has been clarified. Again, this is a common adult response to the problems children express. When individuals express an emotional response to another person or event, it is often initially described in global terms. As the message continues, the issues become clearer and more specific. If a teacher's response, which includes evaluation and advice, is given too early, it may be misdirected and the child may be left feeling misunderstood.

On reflection

What are the implications of this information for Karen, our teacher at the beginning of this chapter?

A communication system constructed and applied by Gordon (1974) and by Dinkmeyer and Mackay (1982, 1990) is useful in these circumstances. The system involves three component processes of listening, asserting and negotiating, and continues to be recommended by other communication theorists such as Dettmer et al. (2002) for use not only with children, but also when communicating with parents and other education professionals.

The listening component in this system uses the method labelled by Gordon (1974) as *active listening*. This approach requires the listener to respond with a paraphrased version of the speaker's message, with the intention of checking the listener's understanding of the message. The paraphrasing should if possible include reference to the feeling expressed through non-verbal signals, as well as the content expressed verbally (Geldard & Geldard, 1997). Listening in this way encourages the speaker to continue, which provides him or her with the opportunity to unburden, express and thus release emotion, and to clarify issues that can then be appropriately dealt with. It also communicates to the speaker that the listener cares and is actively listening. Caring provides strong relationship-building potential and thus assists in developing a fundamental principle underpinning the approaches promoted in this book, namely, the link between healthy relationships and positive behaviour.

Active listening is a powerful technique commonly used by psychologists and counsellors (Geldard & Geldard, 1997). It is included in training courses for social work, personnel management, nursing, and other professions in which human interaction and positive relationships are required. It is also often the natural behaviour of close friends (Dinkmeyer & Mackay, 1982).

In Box 4.5, Shona began by expressing a strong emotion. Ms Lim resisted the temptation to ask why, or to respond with advice such as 'Why don't you just ignore her?' or to moralise or otherwise devalue Shona's feelings by saying things like 'That's not a nice way to talk!' or 'You need to learn to get along with others, Shona.' By responding with a paraphrase of the emotion she heard, Ms Lim communicated that she cares about Shona and that she is willing to listen without judging her. Ms Lim encouraged Shona to continue to talk, and thus enabled Shona to express her emotions and specify the problem more clearly. In her second response, Ms Lim again avoided asking 'Why?', but took a broad guess at the source of the problem and expressed it in a tentative way. In her third response Ms Lim demonstrated empathy by indicating she understood

BOX 4.5

ACTIVE LISTENING

Read the following conversation between Ms Lim and Shona.

- Shona: I hate Amy!
- Ms L.: Sounds like you're pretty angry with her.
- Shona: Yeah, she's nothing but a pain in the neck.
- Ms L.: You feel annoyed about something she's done?
- Shona: She's always picking on me. Today she told all the other kids these terrible stories about me.
- Ms L.: It does hurt when people talk about you behind your back.
- Shona: Yeah, she does it all the time. Last week she was spreading rumours about Julie. I don't think I'll have anything to do with her any more.
- Ms L.: You think you might be better off keeping away from her?
- Shona: Yeah! I think that's a good idea. Then I wouldn't have to put up with her at all. No one else likes her anyway.

the cause of Shona's feelings. Shona's next statement showed a reduction in emotional expression and so Ms Lim paraphrased the content of Shona's statement.

The process enabled Shona to finally come to a rational conclusion that Ms Lim may have suggested herself earlier in the sequence, but because she helped Shona to find the solution herself, Shona would be more likely to accept, and be committed to, that course of action. Shona and Ms Lim have also concluded this sequence with a strengthened relationship, so Shona is likely to return if further difficulties emerge.

The process of active listening is not always easy initially. It often feels unnatural at first but becomes easier and more automatic with practice.

Practising active listening

To implement active listening it is necessary to give full attention to what the child is saying and then feed back a paraphrased version of the content, the feeling, or both (Adler et al., 1995; Geldard & Geldard, 1997) (see Activity 4.5 at the end of this chapter).

When formulating a response, Dinkmeyer and Mackay recommend sentence stems such as those in the bulleted list following this paragraph. The response should be as specific as possible. The more accurate the paraphrasing, the more understood the child is likely to feel. However, on occasions when the feeling or contingency is difficult to discern, the 'Sounds like ...' stem may be a useful default. Recommended sentence stems (Dinkmeyer & Mackay, 1982, pp. 47–52) are:

- 'It must be ... when ...'
- 'You feel ... because ...?'
- 'You're saying that ...?'
- 'You're ... because ...?'
- 'Sounds like ...?'
- 'It seems as though ... and you feel ...?'
- 'I guess you feel ... when ...?'

These authors further recommend that the following characteristics be displayed when listening actively:

- Try to be on the same level as the child by sitting and maintaining eye contact.
- Make your responses tentative: the aim is to check your understanding, not to tell children how they feel.
- Take note of the child's non-verbal messages to more accurately guess the feeling.
- Try to make the process sound natural.
- Keep listening actively until a natural conclusion is reached.

This process may end naturally in a solution, as in the example given. If not, the negotiation sequence described later in this chapter may be entered into once the emotion has been cleared.

Open questioning

During the process of active listening the teacher may wish to ask questions to gain further information or to help children consider issues they haven't raised. Geldard and Geldard (1997) suggest that

open questions are usually more useful than closed questions to encourage a child to continue discussing a problem. *Open questioning* therefore usually requires an open-ended response. *Closed questions* are those that can be answered with yes/no responses, or those that give limited choices.

For example, when Ms Lim was listening to Shona in Box 4.5, she may have asked at some point: 'How do the other girls feel about Amy?' or 'What do you think Amy will do if you avoid her?' Questions that begin with *how*, *what*, *when* or *where* are usually open. Questions that begin with *did* or *is*, or questions that give few choices, are usually closed because they can be answered with a yes or a no. Questions that begin with *why*, though technically open, require the child to justify his or her behaviour and often operate as closed questions, gaining the response 'I don't know', or a shrug of the shoulders. For this reason, 'why' questions are usually regarded as semi-closed questions.

Asserting

Listening skills assist communication because they enable the listener to interpret others' messages more accurately. Because they assist in reducing emotional interference, listening skills also enable speakers to express their thoughts more clearly. In situations where it is necessary to reduce interference when sending a message (as opposed to receiving one), *assertive communication* methods may be useful.

The principle of *assertive communication* suggests that people often send messages in ways that ignore either the rights of the speaker or those of the listener. When this occurs, interference is created, which reduces the likelihood of the intended message being received openly. Messages that ignore the speaker's rights are labelled *submissive* and those that ignore the listener's rights are considered *aggressive*. Communication that recognises the rights of the speaker without infringing on the rights of the listener is considered *assertive* (Kaye, 1994).

For example, reflect on Activity 4.2 at the end of this chapter. Had Ms Lim been submissive with Angelo when she saw him throwing stones she may have responded by saying 'Angelo, please don't throw stones, that's very upsetting'. Had she been aggressive, she may have said 'Angelo, you are a horrible little bully. Don't you have enough sense to realise you can hurt people if you throw stones? Now go to the staffroom and hope I calm down before I see you again.' Instead, she calmly asserted 'Angelo, stop throwing stones.'

If Ms Lim had responded submissively, Angelo may have interpreted it as weakness and continued his behaviour or attempted to manipulate Ms Lim. Had Ms Lim responded aggressively the situation may have intensified, with Angelo reacting to the attacks on his character. With assertive communication, Angelo was more likely to react in response to the behaviour being addressed rather than any interfering communication.

There are many approaches to assertive communication (for a detailed analysis see in particular Adler et al. (1995) or Kaye (1994), listed in 'Further reading' at the end of the chapter). We now discuss one approach, known as the I-message.

I-messages

This method was developed by Thomas Gordon (1974) as part of his Teacher Effectiveness Training (TET) course (see his text for a more comprehensive description of the I-message

BOX 4.6

The following are examples of I-messages.

- 'When I get interrupted during a lesson I feel frustrated because I have to keep stopping.'
- 'When I find the classroom in a mess I feel disappointed because I spend a lot of time trying to make it look attractive.'
- 'When I see how much you've learned I feel very satisfied because my work has been successful.'

technique). The method remains effective and is recommended by other theorists of professional communication in general (Putnis & Petelin, 1996) and applied specifically in the school setting (Dettmer et al., 2002). The method forms the second main component in the communication system proposed by Gordon (1974), and Dinkmeyer and Mackay (1982, 1990).

An *I-message* is a particular type of assertive statement constructed in a way that asserts the speaker's wishes and gives a clear reason why the speaker's desires are important. It does so without impinging on the rights of the listener and leaves the decision to act respectfully in the hands of the listener. It is called an I-message because the focus is on the speaker's needs, rather than on the listener's behaviour.

Gordon (1974) recommended that I-messages be used when the teacher has a problem that requires the child's cooperation to reach a solution. Before enforcing a solution, the teacher brings the problem to the child's attention and in so doing demonstrates faith in the child's willingness to cooperate. This process is discussed further in Chapter 7, as it particularly applies to Gordon's further development of the goal-centred theoretical approach.

An I-message is a statement that asserts your position by describing a problem you have observed, how you feel about it and why you feel that way. Dinkmeyer and Mackay (1990) describe three components. First, it contains a non-judgmental description of the circumstances causing the problem from your point of view (for example, 'When I regularly get interrupted during a lesson ...'). Then it describes your own emotional reaction (for example, 'I feel frustrated'). Finally, it describes the outcomes that you experience (for example, 'Because I have to keep stopping ...'). The aim is to give children accurate feedback about the legitimate effect on you of their behaviour. These authors further emphasise that it should therefore be spoken in a calm, matter-of-fact tone and should represent your experience accurately without exaggeration (see Box 4.6 and Activity 4.6).

Negotiating

Active listening and asserting using I-messages have their main impact as methods of problem solving through negotiation. Active listening assists the child to clarify a problem and to address the situation free from emotional interference, and potentially arrive at a workable solution. I-messages enable teachers to clarify a problem they are experiencing to the children who are

causing it on the basis that if the children understand the impact of their behaviour on the teacher, they will cease the behaviour.

On many occasions, despite the use of listening or assertion, the problem may remain unresolved. In these situations the negotiation method described here may be useful. *Negotiation* relies on the principles of mutual respect and the removal of interference caused through emotion and message contamination. This approach is based on the reflective thinking model developed by educationist John Dewey (1933) as part of his classic work on scientific method. Although the model has been applied across many disciplines (Dettmer et al., 2002; Hanks, 1999; Putnis & Petelin, 1996), the adaptations made by Gordon (1974) and Dinkmeyer and Mackay (1982) are reported here in a modified form. The negotiation process represents the final component in the communication system recommended by these theorists, and incorporates the listening and asserting components described earlier. Six steps are involved in the negotiation process.

NEGOTIATING A SOLUTION

Note that in the steps listed below, the approach identified with a bullet point (•) is suggested where the issue is the child's problem. Where the issue is a problem for the teacher, the approach identified with a triangle (Δ) is suggested. Where there are no bullet points or triangles, the suggested approach applies to both conditions.

1 Identify the problem

- Active listening and open questioning are used until the child's emotional response is expressed and the true nature of the problem is identified.
- Δ An I-message format is used to clearly express the nature of the problem, and active listening is used to understand the child's response.

2 Identify possible options

- The child lists possible options first, without censorship or evaluative comment at this stage. If there are other options the teacher then makes suggestions, again without elaboration. An open questioning format is used.
- Δ Both the teacher and the child list ideas without elaboration or evaluative comment.

3 Identify the outcomes of each choice

- The child identifies how he or she will be affected by each option. The potential to solve the problem and any other outcomes are identified.
- Δ The outcomes for the teacher and the child are identified, as well as each option's potential to solve the problem.

4 Delete unacceptable options

Where either the child or the teacher feels strongly that they have no wish to consider certain options (because of unacceptable outcomes listed in step 3), these options should be deleted from the list.

5 Apply the agreed solution

- The child is asked to choose the option that seems to have the best chance of success, with the least risk of negative repercussions.
- Δ An agreement is made between the child and the teacher to comply with the choice that appears to have the best chance of success with the least risk of negative repercussions to either. A win-win solution is the aim: if either party feels dissatisfied, then commitment to the solution will be reduced and the solution, no matter how satisfactory it appears, may be undermined.

6 Identify a time for review

The teacher and the child agree to a trial run for a defined period of time: not too short, or the full effect of the new approach may not be noticed, or new skills may not be mastered; not too long, or unforeseen negative outcomes might make the system unworkable. Usually a few days or a week is necessary, but this depends on the regularity of the situation's occurrence. If the solution works, both parties agree to implement it indefinitely. If the solution is unsuccessful for either, then the parties return to step 2 in order to modify the solution or develop a new one.

Source: Adapted from Dinkmeyer and Mackay (1982), and Gordon (1974).

Summary

Communication is a complex, two-way process that involves multi-channelled messages and feedback, setting the scene for positive relationships. Many people have had little training in communication skills and are often unaware of the effect of their total communicative behaviour. Low personal awareness is particularly evident in the areas of non-verbal communication and listening skills.

Non-verbal communication – incorporating facial expressions, eye and body movements, body positioning, aspects of voice quality, inflection, and setting characteristics – often accounts for the majority of the meaning a listener constructs. This aspect of communication is often difficult to interpret and regularly results in misunderstanding. An awareness of the non-verbal dimension of communication is important in eliminating interference effects.

Using specific listening and asserting skills when teachers and children experience problems in schools may also help to eliminate interference. The use of such skills is itself communicative, and assists in developing a productive classroom ecosystem that promotes a climate of mutual respect and interpersonal care. Such a climate encourages positive relationships and behaviours.

Key concepts

- active listening
- assertive communication
- feedback
- I-message
- interference
- interpersonal communication
- negotiation
- non-verbal communication
- open questioning

Activities

ACTIVITY 4.1

This activity is intended to demonstrate the potential for inequality of messages sent and received.

Start a rumour

- Organise a class group of about 20 students. Student 1 thinks of a message that contains one or two sentences to describe a fictitious character. Student 1 writes this message down, but keeps the written record hidden. Student 1 then whispers the message to Student 2, Student 2 whispers to Student 3, and so on until Student 19 tells Student 20. Student 20 then writes down the message he or she received. Student 1's written message is then compared to Student 20's written message. The results are often quite alarming.
- As a group, but without recrimination, try to fully explain how the variation in the messages occurred.

ACTIVITY 4.2

This activity is intended to highlight the effect of interference in communication.

1. Identify the sources of interference in the dialogue following, and state whether they are internal or external.
2. What is the outcome of the interference in this communication?
3. Do you think it is possible to avoid interference?

Shona, Julie and Amy are sitting under the tree having lunch and chatting. Angelo walks past them, looking for a place to sit by himself. The three girls suddenly burst out laughing, and Angelo responds:

Angelo: What're you laughing at?

The girls stop and look in his direction, unaware that he believes they were laughing at him.

Amy: What's up with you, turtle-head — lost your mummy?

Angelo: Drop dead, fairy bread!

Angelo picks up a handful of nuts that have fallen from the tree and throws them at the girls. The girls shield themselves and begin shouting at Angelo. Ms Lim, the teacher on playground duty, comes over to see what the commotion is about.

Ms L.: Angelo, stop throwing stones!

Angelo: I wasn't throwing stones. I haven't got any stones in my hands. Besides, they were laughing at me.

Angelo pokes his tongue out in the direction of the girls

Ms L.: Angelo, I think you should go and sit on the seat outside the staffroom for a while until you calm down.

Angelo: No! I'm not going and you can't make me.

Ms Lim takes Angelo by the arm over to the seat. Angelo walks along mumbling something about teachers always picking on him and the girls being the teacher's pets. He sits.

Ms L.: When you've calmed down, Angelo, I want to talk to you about this. Stay here until I come back.

Ms Lim leaves to continue her supervision of the playground. Angelo drops his lunch on the ground and kicks it towards Ms Lim's departing feet.

ACTIVITY 4.3

Use the negotiation model proposed in this chapter to further develop the dialogue between:

- a Shona and Ms Lim, to help Shona identify other solutions to her problem with Amy. You might begin this extension with Ms Lim responding to Shona's last statement with: 'Avoiding Amy might help. Would you like me to help you come up with other solutions?'
- b Ms Lim and Angelo, concerning Angelo's stone-throwing behaviour. Imagine Angelo has been involved in this and other socially unacceptable behaviours many times in the past, and Ms Lim wants to reach a long-term solution. You might begin with Ms Lim saying: 'Angelo, when I see children throwing stones I worry because someone might get hurt. I'd like to work out some ways you could play at school without getting angry.'

ACTIVITY 4.4

This activity is designed to demonstrate the effect of eye behaviour on communication flow.

The group should form pairs. Each pair should begin a conversation in a normal way and should continue to converse for about two minutes. When the conversation is comfortably underway, each person should begin to notice his or her own eye movements and those of his or her partner, but not try to control them or direct these movements in any way.

- Notice which person looks at the other most of the time.
- What happens when one person looks away?

After approximately one minute, look directly at your partner's eyes while you continue to converse for a further minute.

- How does the change in eye behaviour make you feel?
- How does it affect the flow of the conversation?

At the conclusion of the activity, discuss as a whole group the purpose of eye movements in regulating conversation between people.

- Did the simple awareness of eye movements have an effect on the conversation you developed?
- Why would simple awareness have such an effect?
- What happened to the conversation when you held a constant eye gaze?
- What effect would other non-verbal behaviours have had on the conversation? These might be factors such as:
 - your proximity to your partner
 - whether you and your partner were touching
 - whether you and your partner were emotionally involved in the topic
 - whether one of you dressed formally and spoke to the other while standing.

ACTIVITY 4.5

This activity is intended to provide an opportunity to practise the skill of active listening. Further practice will be necessary, however, and you are encouraged to seek opportunities to practise the skill during regular daily experiences.

1. Divide the group into pairs.
2. One person in the pair (the 'speaker') says a sentence exactly as they intend it – for example, as angry, disgusted, delighted and so on. (Note that many statements may be made with alternative feelings being expressed.) The speaker should choose an emotion and use appropriate non-verbal signals to accompany the statement to make it as realistic as possible.
3. The other person in the pair (the 'listener') responds with an active listening paraphrase.
4. Alternate between speaker and listener.

Actively listen to the following:

- 'I really can't stand Miss Johns.'
- 'I don't know what to do.'
- 'He's a pig!'
- 'She doesn't like me any more.'
- 'I had a great time at the weekend.'
- 'Netball was fun this week.'
- 'I really hope I pass this test.'
- 'I'm hopeless at maths.'

More practice

Convert the responses listed below into active listening paraphrases.

MESSAGE GIVEN	RESPONSE MADE
'I'm really dumb!'	'Don't be so stupid!'
'I hate school and I'm not coming back.'	'There's nothing you can do about it; you'll have to.'
'I haven't got any friends.'	'No wonder, the way you behave when you're with friends.'
'There's something really worrying me.'	'Can't you see I'm busy?'
'Julie won't speak to me any more.'	'Go and find someone else to play with.'

ACTIVITY 4.6

Construct a suitable I-message for the following problems. Try it out on paper first, then divide into pairs and try it out with your partner.

1. Julie constantly leans back on her chair and is in danger of falling.
2. Amy is constantly irritating the students who sit in front of her, and the resultant disturbance interrupts the lesson.
3. Angelo often becomes rude when you can't respond to his calls for assistance straight away.
4. Allan regularly hands in untidy and incomplete work. You believe this is due to a lack of effort rather than any learning difficulty.
5. Ivan is a very noisy child, an aspect of his character you find disturbing.

Dinkmeyer, Mackay and Dinkmeyer (1980) also recommend that I-messages are useful for conveying positive messages – giving children accurate feedback about things they did that made you feel good. These may be useful as encouragement. Try to make I-messages of the following:

1. Ivan spoke quietly for once.
2. Shona always puts in a tremendous effort with written work.
3. When you returned to your room today, the students were working quietly.
4. Allan made an effort to be neat this time.
5. Julie smiled and said 'Good morning' to you today.

ACTIVITY 4.7

In what ways could communication methods based on mutual respect alter classroom ecosystem? How could these affect disruptive children as well as those who already exhibit positive behaviour?